Newsletter of Deccan Birders (formerly Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh)
New Series Volume 20 Number 13 December 2023

FIELD TRIP-1: Sunday, 10th December 2023, 6.30AM: Damagundam Reserve Forest. Meeting Point: Sri Guru Raghavendra Udupi Hotel, near TSPA Junction, 5.00AM. Trip Coordinator(s): Gowthama Poludasu (Mobile: 94409-10967)

Damagundam Reserve Forest, a hotspot for avian diversity and endemism. Damagundam Reserve Forest is located in Vikarabad district of Telangana, about 70 km from Hyderabad. It is one of the two major reserve forest blocks in Vikarabad forest range, along with Ananthagiri. The forest is home to a variety of habitats, including dry deciduous, scrub, grassland, wetland and rocky outcrops. We will be birding around the Damagundam Temple area. The temple is in the middle of a dense forest and surrounded by lush greenery.

We will cover different habitats and look for the resident and migratory birds that inhabit them, like Painted Spurfowl, Small Minivet, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, Indian Blue Robin, Taiga Flycatcher, Ultramarine Flycatcher, Booted Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Eurasian Kestrel, Brown Fish Owl etc., also some rare sightings like Indian Pitta, Malabar Whistling Thrush, Orange-breasted Green Pigeon, Blyth's Paradise-Flycatcher, Blue-and-white Flycatcher, etc.

FIELD TRIP-2: Sunday, 17th December 2023, 6.30AM: Ananthagiri Hills. Meeting Point(s): NMDC Main Gate, Mehdipatnam, 05:30AM; Telangana State Police Academy, Chilkur Balaji Temple Road, 05:45AM. Trip Coordinator(s): Sudhir Moorti (Mobile: 96522-83335)

Besides being a pleasant woodland walk, Ananthagiri has always been very productive from the birding viewpoint, and is a paradise for forest birds. One can see Flycatchers, White-eyes, Chloropsis, Orange-headed Thrush, Nightjars, among others. The Indian Pitta and the Brown Fish Owl have been reported earlier.

Both trips will be half-day trips, so carry adequate water and breakfast/snacks, and protective gear if required. Covid protocols will be followed; please ensure you wear masks, carry a sanitiser and maintain social distancing. Non-members are most welcome; however, they are requested to contribute Rs. 100/- per person to the Deccan Birders kitty. New Deccan Birders hats and caps will be available for purchase; please come prepared!

BIRD-WATCHING IN DEVBHOOMI
Trip Report: Mussoorie, June 9-12, 2023

Text & Photos: Sita Susarla

A trek in the foothills of Garhwal Himalayan Range in the cool summer months is one of the best ways to engage in bird watching, as the weather is conducive to the whole day activity of both birds and bird watchers. The dense vegetation consisting mainly of Oak, Beech, Pine, Teak, Sal, Rhododendron and Deodar, is home to a large number of montane and highland birds.

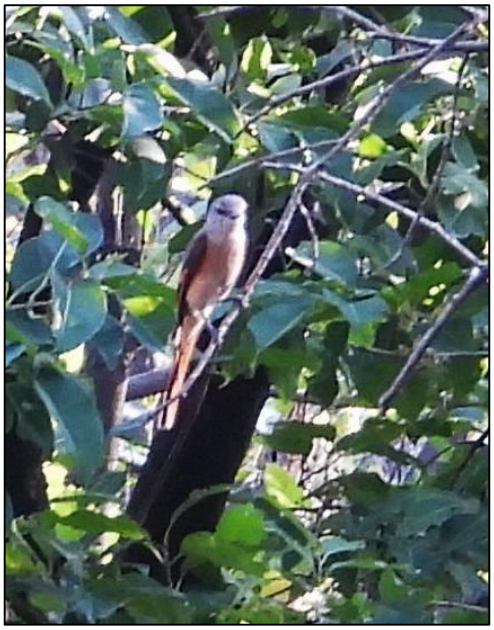
As tourism is at its peak during summer months and getting good accommodation at Mussoorie is difficult, we halted at village Bhitarli on the Lambidhar bypass road *en route* to Mussoorie. The village houses a wonderful wellness resort, a getaway for all nature lovers. With an elevation of about 1600 feet and nestled in the lap of serene nature, the resort offers a good stay, a healthy menu and an oxygen enriched environment.

Blue-throated Barbet

We reached this wellness resort at dusk and were surprised at intense bird activity. There were Blue-throated Barbets, a flock of Himalayan Bulbuls, Cinereous Tits, Black-hooded Orioles, Slaty-headed Parakeets, Yellow-throated Sparrows (aka Chestnut-shouldered Petronias) and Great Barbets. The birds were getting ready to roost and the air was filled with a multitude of calls from the tree tops.

Chestnut-shouldered Petronia

Excited by the unexpected bird activity, we set off on a bird walk the next morning within the resort itself, instead of venturing out into the surrounding wilderness. Our hunch was right because as the day unfolded, we found ourselves amidst birds of different hues and colours. There were Cinereous Tits and Yellow-throated Sparrows foraging on the ground. A pair of Blue-throated Barbets were still snugly perched on the tree top with half-opened eyes. Soon a flock of Scarlet Minivets were seen soaring into the sky, and a few were spotted feeding on forest berries. Among them were three pale coloured Minivets which we quickly identified as Rosy Minivets.



Rosy Minivet

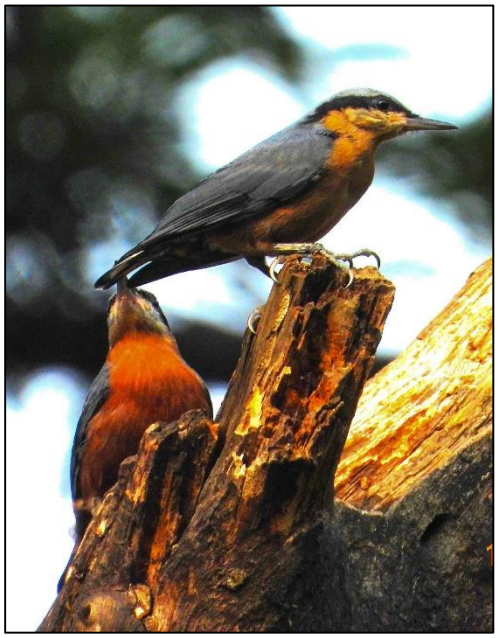
All this while there was continuous activity at the Firebush plant, *Hamelia patens*, a shrub with vivid fiery orange red flowers. Hopping from one flower to another were two Crimson Sunbirds, sipping nectar from the succulent flowers. Then came a Purple Sunbird, and the first thing it did was to chase its crimson cousins away. It was an iridescent colour play of red and blue sunbirds.

Crimson Sunbird

After a quick breakfast we embarked on another route within the resort that turned equally exciting with the spotting of Brown-fronted and Grey-headed Woodpeckers, White-browed Fantail, Black-chinned Babblers and the elusive Mistle Thrush that kept calling continuously.

As the day warmed up the activity decreased and there was milder activity after 4:00PM. The birds we could add to our list were the Slaty-headed Parakeets, Black Bulbuls and Grey Treepie.

Black Bulbul



Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch

Though we had to leave for Mussoorie early the next day, we made one more tour early in the morning, this time into a small open area surrounded by tall trees. As soon as we arrived at this open patch, we spotted an Orange-headed Ground Thrush and a pair of Chestnut-bellied Nuthatches on a barren trunk. The sunlight was perfect to click some fabulous pictures.

Spot-winged Starling

Verditer Flycatcher

On the same trunk was a Spot-winged Starling and a Chestnut-tailed Starling, and in the backdrop was a Verditer Flycatcher and some Indian White-eyes. There was a Large-billed Crow and a few Yellow-footed Green Pigeons that were sunning on the tree tops.

For a moment we stood still, stunned by the presence of so many species in the little open patch. Well, that is the beauty of Uttarakhand. Every nook and corner is a habitat in itself.

Mussoorie was a thirty-kilometre uphill journey from where we were, and took nearly three and a half hours due to the summer traffic. Our accommodation was at a homestay with a captivating panoramic view of the Garhwal mountains, and rich and varied vegetation around.

Himalayan Black-lored Tit

Blue Whistling Thrush

From the balcony of our room, we could see almost a dozen different birds flying around. The Blue Whistling Thrush, Black Bulbuls, Jungle Mynas, Himalayan Black-lored, Cinereous and Black-throated Tits, Streaked Laughingthrush, Grey Treepie, Blue-throated and Great Barbets, Grey-hooded Warbler and Blue-capped Rock Thrush were all spotted in the first one hour.

Grey-hooded Warbler

Streaked Laughingthrush

The next day we trekked from Hathipaon to the top of George Everest peak. While we listened to interesting anecdotes of History and Geography of 'Mansuri', the erstwhile name of Mussoorie, along with references to local vegetation, from our well-versed guide, a flock of Red-billed Blue Magpies crossed our path and our talk shifted to birds that we saw all along the trek, the Grey-winged Blackbird, Little Pied Flycatcher, and many Egyptian Vultures that were sighted atop the George Everest Peak. From this peak, that stood at an elevation of 6578 feet we could see the Doon Valley in all its splendour. It was an amazing view, very invigorating after the steep trek, and a fitting finale to a lovely trip.

Grey-winged Blackbird

The full list of birds seen during the trip:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	11	Slaty-headed Parakeet	*Psittacula himalayana*
2	Oriental Turtle Dove	*Streptopelia orientalis*	12	Plum-headed Parakeet	*Psi1acula cyanocephala*
3	Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*	13	Scarlet Minivet	*Pericrocotus flammeus*
4	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	14	Rosy Minivet	*Pericrocotus roseus*
5	Little Swift	*Apus affinis*	15	White-browed Fantail	*Rhipidura aureola*
6	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*	16	Ashy Drongo	*Dicrurus leucophaeus*
7	Great Barbet	*Psilopogon virens*	17	Indian Paradise-flycatcher	*Terpsiphone paradisi*
8	Blue-throated Barbet	*Psilopogon asiaticus*	18	Yellow-billed Blue Magpie	*Urocissa flavirostris*
9	Brown-fronted Woodpecker	*Dendrocoptes auriceps*	19	Grey Treepie	*Dendrocitta formosae*
10	Grey-headed Woodpecker	*Picus canus*	20	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
21	Large-billed Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*	39	Shikra	*Accipiter badius*
22	Cinereous Tit	*Parus cinereus*	40	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*
23	Red-rumped Swallow	*Cecropis daurica*	41	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*
24	Himalayan Bulbul	*Pycnonotus leucogenys*	42	Himalayan Black-lored Tit	*Machlolophus xanthogenys*
25	Black Bulbul	*Hypsipetes leucocephalus*	43	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*
26	Indian White-eye	*Zosterops palpebrosus*	44	Grey-hooded Warbler	*Phylloscopus xanthoschistos*
27	Black-chinned Babbler	*Cyanoderma pyrrhops*	45	Black-throated Tit	*Aegithalos concinnus*
28	Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch	*Sitta cinnamoventris*	46	Streaked Laughingthrush	*Trochalopteron lineatum*
29	Chestnut-tailed Starling	*Sturnia malabarica*	47	Jungle Babbler	*Turdoides striata*
30	Spot-winged Starling	*Saroglossa spiloptera*	48	White-crested Laughingthrush	*Garrulax leucolophus*
31	Orange-headed Thrush	*Zoothera citrina*	49	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
32	Mistle Thrush	*Turdus viscivorus*	50	Jungle Myna	*Acridotheres fuscus*
33	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*	51	Blue-capped Rock Thrush	*Monticola cinclorhyncha*
34	Verditer Flycatcher	*Eumyias thalassinus*	52	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*
35	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*	53	Blue Whistling Thrush	*Myophonus caeruleus*
36	Crimson Sunbird	*Aethopyga siparaja*	54	Red-billed Blue Magpie	*Urocissa erythroryncha*
37	Black Francolin	*Francolinus francolinus*	55	Grey-winged Blackbird	*Turdus boulboul*
38	Grey-bellied Cuckoo	*Cacomantis passerinus*	56	Little Pied Flycatcher	*Ficedula westermanni*

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

(From Facebook, August 19, 2022)

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Why Write Up A Birding Trip Report

JVD Moorty

Birders, if I may generalize, go to extreme lengths to see new birds. Some travel for hours to see a rarity; others rise well before dawn to get some birding in before work; and still others plan their vacations, meetings and conferences around birds. One unknown researcher observed these traveling tendencies and realised how useful such birders could be to scientists needing to monitor populations of rare, hard-to-study birds, but don't always have the time or funding to go find them themselves. Aha! What if they could use information gathered from traveling birders to monitor unique populations all over the world?

This is where a birding trip report comes in. A trip report is a document where birdwatchers share any information they consider relevant about a birding trip they just had, and which they can keep for themselves or share with other birders.

There isn't any standard model of the report, one can write it as one wishes. Nonetheless, typically these bird trip reports have some information about the location, dates and a list of birds seen. The reports can be rounded out by including a variety of things, e.g. a few photographs, information about the places visited, how to get to the locations, where to stay, and a brief weather report on the day of the outing. Equally importantly, it is an opportunity to capture the experiences and emotions of the birders themselves, which makes the report a lot more informative and engaging.

There is endless variety one comes across in birding trip reports. Some are story-telling-like with detailed information on the daily routine during the trip; others are short pieces of text with concrete information. Some birders like to include details on the specific location of species observed, whereas others focus on ease of reading and the number of individuals and species seen.

One often comes across detailed reports with information about the region or country, normally referring to currency, traffic, culture and costumes, common language and way of communication, best ways of transportation, suggested places to stay, and local guides. These can be very useful as inconvenient situations can be overcome with fewer hassles.

The main goal of a bird trip report, however, is to inform other birders about the species that can be seen in a specific location during a certain period of time or season.

To do this, birdwatchers upload the reports to websites specifically used for that effect, e.g. eBird. Stuart Butchart, the Head of Science at BirdLife International says: "There are vast armies of birdwatchers across the world; many of them record information that can be hugely valuable for monitoring the state of the environment." Monitoring long-term trends in population size is important for species' conservation assessments. A word of caution here: estimates of the numbers of birds in a flock may also vary depending on the counting technique used or the skills of the birder who writes up the report.

But of course there are pitfalls: when compared with a systematic, scientific approach to population monitoring, birding 'trips' tend to focus on particular spots with abundant birds, like protected areas. Tourists and birding aficionados are likely to spend more time watching and photographing healthy populations of a particular bird, rather than noting that birds aren't present elsewhere. *In fact, birding reports almost never list a lack of sightings*.

One other problem is that rare and endangered species are over-represented in trip reports. Today, eBird is already geared towards using birders' data for scientific analyses, unlike birding trip reports. So, even if the method can't be reliably used to adjust an endangered species' status, it can be a helpful 'alarm bell', to indicate that a species and its conservation may need a closer look. The advantages of the method – it's cheap, free, and can be used immediately – make it a low-risk option in a world with limited options.

So the next time you're taking a big (or a small!) birding trip, go for it – and make sure you write up a trip report afterwards. Scientists – and, I'm certain, even the birds – would thank you!

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We wish all our members a Merry Christmas and a very Happy New Year 2024

Bird of the Month

Text and Photos: Umesh Mani

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse (*Pterocles exustus*)

Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse male (L) and female (R) (Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, November 15, 2023)

Order: Pterocliformes
Family: Pteroclidae
Genus: *Pterocles*
Species: *P. exustus*
Size: 31-33 cm

Description & distribution: The Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, also known as the Common Sandgrouse, is a large, plump, dove-like bird with a pointed tail. It is sexually dimorphic: Male birds are yellowish sandy brown with a thin breast band and solid chestnut-black belly, a yellowish wash to the face and black-fringed yellowish spots on wing-coverts, while females, also sandy brown, are streaked, spotted and barred with black all over except for a mottled neck and a plain chin. On the ground, they appear as very short-legged birds with a small head, while in flight, they seem small to medium sized, with elongated and pointed tails. Juvenile birds are similar to the females, but are duller, have less heavily barred upperparts, lack the breast band, and have shorter tails. Their extremely cryptic coloration makes them almost completely invisible when squatting still.

The Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse is seen across most of northern and central Africa, and further east towards western and southern parts of Asia. It is also an introduced species in the islands of Hawaii. Six sub-species are recognized, of which only *P. e. hindustan* is seen in India. It is seen in dry areas across India, except for the Himalayas and the North East. Besides, it is also seen in Pakistan, but not in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Myanmar.

Habitat & behaviour: The Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, unlike most other Sandgrouses, is a sedentary species that prefers sandy semi-deserts, barren plains, sparse thorny scrub, and fallow fields or stubble at the edges of deserts; it does exhibit extensive local movements, and may also move long distances based on availability of food and water. In spite of living in hot, arid climates, it is heavily reliant on water and is known to travel up to 50 km in search of water, which it does usually soon after sunrise or just before sunset. It is known for soaking its belly feathers and flying back to bring water to its young ones. Outside the breeding season, or when flying for water, it is usually seen in flocks of up to 30 birds. While foraging, it shuffles along on its short legs, picking up large quantities of weed and grass seeds, sometimes supplemented by grit. It may also eat small insects or fallen berries. Its flight is fast and direct, and the call is a penetrating, far-reaching, burbling two-note *kut-ro*, constantly uttered in flight.

Nesting: The Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse breeds generally between January and May. During breeding season, the male develops elongated central tail feathers and fresh plumage. Courtship involves short chases and low vocalization, and usually involves several males courting the female simultaneously; however, this lasts for only a short while, before one male forms a pair bond with the female. The nest is a shallow scrape or depression on the ground, and the usual clutch consists of 3-6 pale greyish or yellowish stone eggs, covered with blotches, spots and speckles in varying shades of brown, with lavender or grey secondary markings.

Local name: The Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse is known as *'Bhat teetar'* or *'Kuhar'* in Hindi, *'Jam polanki'* in Telugu, *'Ka koudari'* in Tamil, *'Deshi batavdo'* or *'Vagadavu batavdo'* in Gujarati and *'Pokurdee'* or *'Pokundi'* in Marathi.

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